

# BRIDAL POND

By ZONA GALE

From *American Mercury*

THE Judge had just said "Case dismissed," and a sharp situation concerning cheese had thus become negligible when, before the next case on the calendar could be called, Jens Jevins came forward and said loudly:

"I wish to confess to the murder of my wife."

Now the courtroom was still, the fierce heat forgotten, and the people stupefied, for Jens Jevins was the richest farmer in the township. No one tried to silence or delay him.

He faced now the Judge and now the people, his face and neck the colour of chicken skin, his tossed hair like a ravelled fabric, his long right arm making always the same gesture. His clothes were good, and someone had pressed them.

"I planned to kill Agna for a long time. There was a time when for a week I slept with a pistol under my pillow, hoping for the strength to shoot her in her sleep. When I could tell by her breathing that it was time, I'd get up on my elbow and look at her, but I never had the courage to use the pistol on her—no, though I sat up in bed sometimes for half an hour with my finger on the trigger. Something would delay me—our dog would bark, or the kitchen clock would strike, or I would imagine my father shaking his head at me; and once she woke and asked me whether I had locked the porch door.

"Most of that week the room was as bright as morning, because the moon shone in, but as it rose later and hung higher, the room grew dark. And it seemed wrong to shoot Agna in the dark. Then I thought of a better plan."

The courtroom was held as a ball of glass, in which black figures hang in arrested motion. The silence was not vacant, but rich and winey, like a rest in music. It was the rest in the tread of a giant, one step, one step, and men crushed and

powerless. The Judge, the bailiff, the spectators were crushed and powerless, all with staring eyes, and their short breath caught through the mouth. Jens and Agna Jevins, they were known to all, and he so prosperous; and she a small complaining woman, who took prizes, with whom all must have talked on bright mornings, after she had lain asleep, close to death.

"At the south of our lot," Jens Jevins continued, and conversationally, quite quietly, as if he were talking to some surveyors, "there is a long slope and then a pond, where in my father's time they took out clay to make bricks. This place is not fenced; is separated from the highway by a few alders—some of you know," he said, with an air of surprise, remembering the spectators as living beings who had experienced his highway and the sight of his pond. "I would go down there sometimes on spring evenings when the boys were catching frogs, and last week I went down, and they were catching frogs. And it was the night the Alexander boy fell in—well over his head he went, for the pond is above seven feet deep there, and sixteen farther out. I that was standing near was able to seize on him—I mention this because pulling him out put in my head the idea of what to do to Agna.

"So the next night I waited till late and I said to her that we might walk down and watch the boys catch frogs. She was glad to go and mentioned that I didn't often invite her to take evening walks any more, and we went down the slope. But I hadn't waited long enough, the boys were still there. She and I stood on the rim of the pond, and I edged her toward the place where the Alexander boy went in, and saw how easy it would be to send her down and keep her from climbing out. Only the boys were still there.

"It was dusk and the cars from town came down the highway and took the turn beyond our alders, and it looked as if they were all coming straight on to us, till they swung the corner. She says, 'What if one didn't see the turn and came crashing on to us?' and she shivered and said her shoulders were chilly, though the night was warm, and she wanted to go back to the house. So we went back and I read the evening paper aloud, about a young couple that had got married that day at Sun Prairie and had had a great doings. She said she wished we were starting over, and I said 'I don't,' and went to bed.

"But in the night I woke up and thought of what she'd said. What if we were starting over? And if I'd murdered her early, say, on the honeymoon? I saw that I couldn't have done it then. I wondered how I could do it now."

## II

Now the Judge found his voice, and leaned down as if he were ill or drunken and said from his throat: "Why did you want to do it?"

Jens Jevins looked astonished. "I didn't *want* to do it," he said, "but there was thirty-seven years of it already and there might be twenty more."

Having answered, he continued:

"I began to see that what wasn't tragedy now would have been tragedy then. I thought of us driving through the country, if we'd been in the days of machines, like the Sun Prairie couple. Agna and me, you understand—and her young again. Her in the same blue dress, in the seat beside me. Me in a new suit, and shoes with the new not off the soles. Us talking and laughing, our valises stowed in the back. Going along the road. Along the road that swung round by our place, and turned the corner by the alder trees. Dark it might be, or maybe a fog would have come down. We'd be talking and laughing, and the road strange, and I'd miss the turn, and the car'd come skimming between the alders, and across the base of the slope, and making for the clay hole. Spite of all I could do, setting the brakes, on it'd come, heading for the clay hole. In the dark or maybe in the fog. And we wouldn't know we'd left the road, till I'd see a light from somewhere lapping on the pond, and then it'd be too late. Straight in and down—in and down. Nothing I could do. Agna in her blue dress. On the day of our wedding.

"But now it was thirty years and past, and twenty more to come. I woke her up. I says, 'I can't sleep. It's warm. Let's go down and walk out somewheres.' She laughed and grumbled some, but she went with me. She was always one to go with me. We put on little and went down the slope to the pond. It was deep dark—the light of a star was deep in the water. We heard the frogs and smelled the first wild grape. I took her to the place where the Alexander boy had slipped in

and where it was hard for anybody to climb out. I wanted a minute. Another car was coming along the road. 'When it turns the corner,' I thought, 'when it turns!' Its lights shone straight and strong, they blinded us, they came on and on, toward us. Agna says, 'It's coming, it's coming! . . .' For the lights made no turn at the corner. The light shot out from the alders. I could hear the talking and laughing in the car. In less than a flash of time, the car shook the ground around us, and went crashing down and down into the deep of the water. But first the lights of the water, or of the dashboard, or of the sky, or of heaven struck full on their faces that were still laughing. Well, there on that seat I tell you I saw me in my wedding suit that was new and beside me Agna, that was young again.

"There was a cry from Agna that was young and from me where I stood—and I saw what I'd done—reached back into the past and killed her that it was tragedy to kill. It was so that it had found me out. God had done it to me—just that way. I see it so. . . . All night I've walked in the woods, waiting for the time to tell. Now you know—now you know."

Jens Jevins stood head down, abruptly distracted, listless. The hundred voices in the room burst their silence. And after the first words, crude and broken, the women were saying: "Walked all night in the woods? But somebody has just pressed his clothes for him!"

Now the sound of running feet and the cries of men reached the room, and as these increased none knew whether to run down in the street or to stay in the courtroom, where Jens Jevins might say something more. But now a great gasping voice cried from the stair: "Car gone into Jevins's clay hole!" . . . and immediately the room was emptied of all but those who must stay, and Jevins, who seemed not to have heard.

As one man, and he breathing his horror, the town of Tarnham ran down the highway, and did not take the turn, but kept straight on and flowed over the green and spangled slope and surrounded the Jevins pond. Some highway men, placing signs, had seen the corner of a top protruding from the water.

And now policemen and firemen were lifting from the water, slowly and with sickening lurchings and saggings, a black coupé, new by the signs, and within it the seated figures of



man and woman. And all about them, on sides and back of the car, were gay ribbon streamers, white and pink, and the lettering said: "Yes, we're just married." And such signs were also pasted in paper, and from them was dangling a water-soaked old shoe. A young chap, he was, with his hands still on the wheel and the emergency brake set, and a rose on his coat lapel; and his young bride, in her neat gown of blue, had her hands folded in her lap, over a little silver bag.

Now the sheriff came leading Jens Jevins and pushed through the crowd, and the people moved respectfully, for the tale of the courtroom had not yet gone about. The sheriff and Jens Jevins went to the two figures, taken from the car and covered on the grass, and Jens said in a loud voice: "There we are!" And now he shouted in agony, "Aгна, Агна! Jens!" and cast himself on the ground beside the two still figures.

## III

The people were stupefied, not knowing what to feel, with the men and women from the courtroom murmuring his story. Jens Jevins—and he so prosperous and known to them all.

They had seen him yesterday, buying and selling. Could his wife have been in the car, too—the complaining woman, who took prizes?

No, for here she came walking down the slope from the house, wondering at the crowd gathered about their pond. She looked questioning, in her neat black dress and her striped scarf, and they made way for her; and a neighbour, who had been in the courtroom, cried: "Mrs. Jevins, Mrs. Jevins! The car that you saw last night go into the water had a bride and groom!"

But Агна Jevins said: "What car? I saw no car go into the water."

"What! You were not out here in the night and saw this car?"

"I?" cried Агна Jevins. "I was in bed the whole night, and Jens too. What car?"

They told her. She covered her eyes and said, "God forgive me, I heard a cry and thought of saying so to Jens, but he was sleeping soundly."

Jens and the sheriff moved toward her, and when he came

up to her Jens began speaking softly: "All our friends, Agna, thinking of us through the night. And who could have imagined that we were spending the whole night so, side by side; and with the sunrise, we still so near to each other, saying nothing. Who could have told us in our early youth: 'You will rest on that night in a bed of ooze, and none shall know or care that you lie passionless and forgotten?' Who could have known that our wedding day and our death night would be one, because of a pond beyond alders, pleasant and secured? We have died with our dream and our happiness upon us, neither trouble nor weariness has touched us, nor the slow rust of unending days. I have no need to send you to your death, for we have died in the safety of our youth and not in the deep of days already dead. . . ."

They led him to his house. Weeping, Mrs. Jevins said:

"It must have come on him all of a rush. For I pressed his clothes and got his breakfast and he went out of the house. And nothing had changed."

The legend grew that Jens Jevins had had a vision of that happening of the night and that it had sent him off his head.